

MindfulLiving™ Module 5

Pain-Free Living

Chapter 8 - Reading

The Five-Step Model of Mindfulness

Excerpted from Living Well With Pain and Illness
by Vidyamala Burch



*Inside this new love... Become the sky ... Escape Walk out
like someone suddenly born into colour. Please do it now.
You're covered with a thick cloud. Slide out the side ... Your
old life was frantic, running from silence. The speechless
full moon comes out now.*

RUMI

This chapter delves into the Five-Step Model of Mindfulness, a practical approach to cultivating mindfulness and emotional intelligence. This model is precious for those dealing with pain and illness. Mindfulness is a state of being and a skill that can be developed through consistent practice. The goal is to transform habitual distractions into moments of mindful awareness.

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Step 1: The Starting Point - Awareness

The first step in developing mindfulness involves becoming attuned to your present experience. This includes:

- ❖ **Breath and Body Awareness:** Pay attention to your breath and bodily sensations as you sit, walk, stand, or lie down. Notice any feelings of discomfort or ease.
- ❖ **Sensory Awareness:** Observe the sensory experiences around you, such as the sun's warmth, the taste of food, or the vibrant colours of nature.
- ❖ **Emotional and Mental Awareness:** Recognise your thoughts and emotions without becoming entangled in them. Observe how they arise and pass away. This practice helps shift your perception from a narrow, black-and-white view of the world to a rich, multi-dimensional experience.



EXERCISE: PRESENT- MOMENT AWARENESS

1. Sensory Check-In:

Notice your current experience. Feel the book in your hands. Is it warm or cold, rough or soft, heavy or light? How does holding it feel? Are your shoulders relaxed or tense? What about your belly—tight or soft? Notice any changes when you focus on these areas.

2. Body and Support:

Observe how your body feels concerning its support. Is it heavy or light, relaxed or tense? Simply notice these sensations without judgment.

3. Breath Awareness:

Focus on how your breath feels in the moment. Which parts of your body move with your breath? Notice the rhythm and depth of your breathing.

4. Environmental Awareness:

Pay attention to the sounds and smells around you. How many colours can you see? Enjoy the various shades and textures.

As you finish this exercise, try to maintain this quality of awareness throughout your day. Stay alert, engaged, and curious about your experiences.

Audio Version: For a guided experience of these exercises, you can access the audio version at Soundstrue.com/Burch.

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Step 2: Move Toward The Unpleasant

The second step in developing mindfulness—moving toward unpleasant aspects of experience—may seem counterintuitive and even daunting. It might sound almost masochistic, but facing pain is crucial. Those of us with chronic pain often resist it by either trying to block it out or by becoming overwhelmed. Neither approach allows us to understand or address the pain truly.

When you first direct your attention to painful sensations, you might become more aware of your resistance than the pain itself. You can work with this resistance by gently "leaning into" it with your awareness and using your breath to explore it more deeply. Inhale with awareness and exhale with a sense of letting go.

Over time, develop a kindly, non-judgmental attitude toward your entire experience. Treat your pain with the same care and compassion a mother would offer her hurt child. Even though you can't remove the pain, a loving response can alleviate some of the distress.

Example: Rebecca's Experience

Rebecca, who has been disabled since birth and has undergone over forty operations, shared how turning toward her pain has been transformative:

"Turning toward the pain meant facing the fear that it would spiral out of control and overwhelm me. I had never truly examined the pain, which made it feel like a monstrous force. By confronting it directly, I noticed its true nature. I found that despite its intensity, it didn't overpower me. I discovered that some pains are more bearable than others and that pain changes from moment to moment. This understanding helped me engage with the pain rather than react to it."

Taking Things One Moment at a Time

It's common to fear that moving toward the pain will exacerbate the sense of drowning. However, feeling overwhelmed often stems from over-identification with thoughts about the pain. Thoughts such as "This is unbearable" or "My life will never improve" can trap you in a cycle of despair.

By focusing on the direct experience of pain rather than the thoughts about it, you can see that the pain is often less daunting than anticipated. Awareness of the present moment reveals that pain is experienced one moment at a time, which is always manageable. As illustrated by my hospital experience discussed in Chapter 1 (see page 5), the fear of enduring pain indefinitely vanished when I realised that living each moment fully, regardless of preference, is the key to being fully alive.

A motivational quote graphic with a sunset background. The text is in white, bold, sans-serif font, centered on the image. The background shows a sunset over water with a purple and blue sky and a pinkish-orange horizon.

"IF YOU DON'T
LIKE SOMETHING,
CHANGE IT.
IF YOU CAN'T
CHANGE IT,
CHANGE THE WAY
YOU THINK
ABOUT IT.

www.sheryclein.com ❤️ shery@sheryclein.com

EXERCISE: MOVING TOWARD THE UNPLEASANT

1. Positioning:

Sit or lie down comfortably and gently open your awareness to any unpleasant or painful sensations. Allow these sensations into your awareness with tenderness and curiosity. Keep breathing deeply throughout.

2. Investigate Resistance:

If you are more aware of resistance than of the pain itself, explore this resistance directly. Imagine shining a soft light on it or gently "leaning into" it with your awareness. Allow it to soften with each breath.

3. Explore Sensations:

Observe the nature of the pain and how it changes. Does it feel hard and tight one moment and softer or sharper the next?

4. Localize Pain:

Try to pinpoint the exact location of the pain in your body. This can reveal that the pain might be more localised than you initially thought.

5. Be Patient:

This might be your first time closely examining your pain, so be patient with any disturbing thoughts or feelings that arise. Notice how these also shift and change. Relax around unpleasant experiences and let your body settle onto the earth with each exhalation.



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Step 3: Seeking The Pleasant

The third step in developing mindfulness is discovering and embracing the pleasant aspects of your experience. This step naturally follows from the second one, which may seem surprising: becoming sensitive to pleasure even amidst pain. While hardening against pain can numb us to life's pleasures, cultivating sensitivity allows us to experience joy and beauty.

When we focus solely on pain, we risk shutting ourselves off from the sun's warmth, the beauty of nature, or the simple pleasure of being present with loved ones. By becoming more attuned to the subtleties of our sensations, we open ourselves to the moment's richness.

Example: Geraldine's Experience

Geraldine, who suffered from severe neck pain and vertigo, shared her transformation:

"My severe neck problem kept me bedridden, and I felt defeated. Initially, I couldn't see beyond the pain. However, as I practised mindfulness, I began to notice the comfort of my pillow, the warmth surrounding me, and the softness of the light in my room. I realised how lucky I was to have such a supportive family. This shift allowed me to appreciate these pleasant aspects despite my pain."

What to Do If You Can't Find Anything Pleasant

If pain dominates your experience, finding pleasure may seem implausible. Approach this exploration with an open mind, free from fixed ideas about your experience. You might be surprised by what you discover.

For instance, after a challenging surgery, I found solace in the contact between my body and the crisp, clean bedsheets. The contrast with the pain made this sensation particularly enjoyable.

Seeking the Pleasant vs. Distraction

While friends and professionals might advise "thinking positively," this can sometimes mask suffering rather than address it. The goal of seeking the pleasant is not to distract but to integrate sensitivity and openness to all aspects of experience. Acknowledge pain with kindness and allow yourself to notice the lovely elements that coexist. This approach promotes a sense of wholeness rather than escaping pain.

EXERCISE: SEEKING THE PLEASANT

1. Body Awareness:

Sit or lie down and become aware of your whole body. Observe your breath as it rises and falls, and allow your body to rest more deeply with each out-breath.

2. Focus on Pleasant Sensations:

If you feel pain, gently shift your focus to pleasant sensations. This might be warmth in your hands, a pleasant tingling, or a sense of relief in your body. Explore these sensations with curiosity and pause when you find something enjoyable.

3. Listen to Pleasant Sounds:

Expand your awareness of any pleasant sounds around you. Appreciate them as they come and go without getting caught up in their source or duration.

4. Visual Appreciation:

Look around you and notice anything beautiful or pleasant in your environment. It could be the light in the room or a picture on the wall. Take a moment to appreciate it as if seeing it for the first time.

Example: Debbie's Revelation

Debbie, who experienced severe musculoskeletal pain and fatigue, was sceptical about finding pleasure amidst her suffering. During a meditation session, she noticed and appreciated the care put into the wall's brickwork in front of her. This realisation was a revelation, demonstrating that even during pain, there are often pleasant aspects we can overlook.



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Step 4: Expanding Awareness & Finding Balance

In the fourth step, you expand your awareness to embrace both the unpleasant and pleasant aspects of your experience, much like shifting from a focused to a wide-angle lens. This stage involves observing the full spectrum of each moment as it unfolds without automatically pushing away discomfort or clinging to pleasure. Mindfulness at this stage is about holding all aspects of your experience with stability and depth.

Zen teacher Charlotte Joko Beck describes this state as "becoming a bigger container." Often, we feel too small to accommodate the fullness of our experiences, leading to stress. You can manage whatever arises with a deep sense of inner spaciousness by perceiving yourself as a larger container. Ideally, this container becomes limitless, allowing for a sense of freedom, stability, and space.

Example: The Teaspoon and the Lake

Consider this analogy: adding a teaspoon of salt to a small glass of water makes it taste intensely salty, but adding the same amount to a lake barely affects the taste. With mindfulness, you can become like that deep and clear lake, where individual experiences don't overwhelm you, and you maintain steadiness through life's fluctuations while being honest about your experiences.

Finding Relief in Acceptance

Accepting the entirety of your experience can be a profound relief. It allows you to relax deeply, grounding your awareness in the stability of your body rather than being swept away by anxious thoughts about pain or illness. Settling into this awareness feels like coming home, where you can experience stability amidst change.

A Sense of Connectedness with Others

This step also involves becoming more aware of others. You may notice how you communicate with friends and family and how their interactions impact you. As you develop greater emotional resilience, you may become less reactive to difficulties and more able to enjoy the company of others, feeling more relaxed and less burdened by interpersonal challenges.

EXERCISE: OPENING TO THE WHOLE OF EXPERIENCE

1. Body Awareness:

As you sit or lie down, bring your awareness to the entirety of your experience. Notice the contact between your hands and the book or the sensation of your body on the chair or bed. Focus on your breath briefly, feeling how it gently rocks your body. Imagine floating on a gentle ocean swell, rocked by the rhythmic movement.

2. Wide-Angle Awareness:

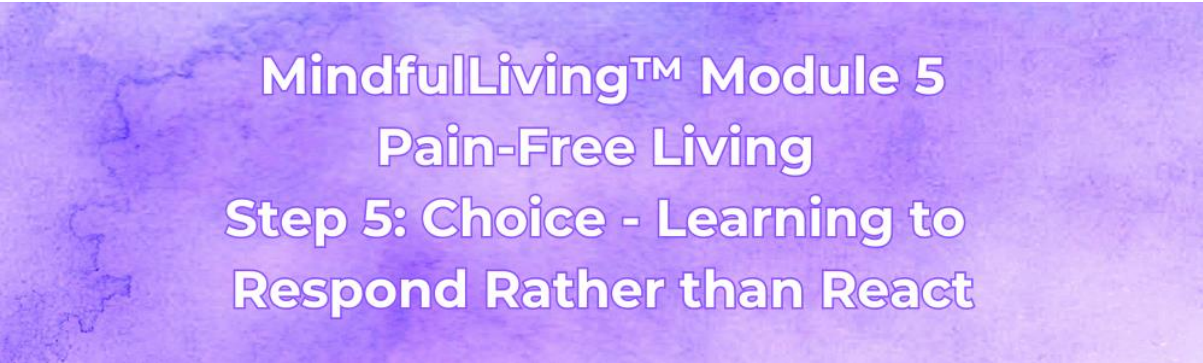
Visualise all aspects of your experience within a broad and open field of awareness. Let everything rise and fall with a sense of fluidity and change. Resist the urge to push away discomfort or cling to pleasure. When you notice resistance or clinging, gently return to a sense of openness and inclusivity.

3. Awareness of the World:

Extend your awareness of the world around you. Reflect on how mindfulness has helped you become more present and connected with your surroundings. For instance, my experience creating a nature film taught me to appreciate the world's dynamic beauty despite personal limitations. I learned to observe the changing clouds and the texture of the natural world with an open and non-grasping attitude.

Example: Embracing the World

In my late twenties, I spent eighteen months making a film based on nature images, a period of significant personal growth. Despite physical limitations, photography allowed me to combine my love for nature with creative expression. Capturing the ever-changing beauty of the world, from the sky to volcanic sands, taught me the importance of appreciating life's fleeting beauty without trying to hold onto it.



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Step 5: Choice - Learning to Respond Rather than React

In this fifth step, you move towards the practice of choosing how you respond to your experiences, especially when they involve difficulties. The essence of mindfulness lies in the freedom to choose your response rather than merely reacting to what arises. Every step in mindfulness involves a choice: deciding to notice your experience, to engage with both painful and pleasant aspects, to broaden your awareness, and finally, to respond thoughtfully rather than react impulsively. These stages help you differentiate between primary suffering—direct sensations of discomfort—and secondary suffering, which arises from your resistance to these sensations. You create a sense of spaciousness, like a larger container, by cultivating a broader awareness. This approach allows you to respond creatively and with a gentle heart to any situation rather than feeling overwhelmed and trapped by your pain.

Example: A Diary Entry

Here's an example from my own experience:

Today, I woke up tired and nauseous but determined to stick to my writing schedule. As I tried to push through the back pain, fatigue, and nausea, I noticed myself hardening against the discomfort, which only increased my tension. I realised this wasn't working, so I decided to lie down and listen to a meditation CD. By the end of the session, I felt like I had broken free from my old patterns and gained a new perspective. It became clear that completing my writing today was less important than I initially thought. Now, at 5:30 PM, the writing flows smoothly, and I use a timer to remind me to take breaks. Each time the timer goes off, I face a choice: do I react by ignoring it, or do I respond by taking a break?

Mindfulness Is Not Suppression

Understanding the value of responding rather than reacting does not mean you should suppress your emotions. It's important to be genuinely aware of what's happening rather than forcing yourself into a false calm state. If you feel grumpy or irritable, the practice is acknowledging these feelings without judgment and finding the most constructive way to respond.

Living with pain can lead to challenging emotions such as irritability or anger. Recognising these emotions when they arise provides space around them and prevents them from escalating into a cycle of blame or self-pity. While facing these feelings can be challenging and humbling, you experience a small taste of freedom each time you manage it.

Personal Example: Dealing with Irritability

One way my pain affects me is through impatience and irritability, particularly in lengthy discussions or group settings that require patience. I tend to make decisions quickly to end the discomfort, but this approach can strain relationships. Instead of trying to eliminate these feelings, I've learned to acknowledge and accept them. My mindfulness practice helps me notice when I'm feeling irritable without becoming defensive and allows me to make more thoughtful choices about how I act.

Example of Authentic Mindfulness

During a recent training retreat, a colleague named Ratnaguna exemplified this honest approach to mindfulness. When he appeared withdrawn during a meeting, he openly shared his irritability without blaming others. His meditation practice enabled him to identify and communicate his feelings precisely. Understanding that his irritability stemmed from underlying sadness, he knew that giving himself time alone would help him process and move through the emotion. I found his ability to be candid about his difficult emotions without suppressing or overidentifying with them inspiring. He demonstrated that it is possible to hold space for challenging emotions while allowing them to pass naturally.

SPECIAL ISSUES FOR PRACTICING MINDFULNESS WITH PAIN AND ILLNESS

Mindfulness can seem deceptively simple, but there are specific considerations for those living with pain or illness. Let's explore a few key areas where mindfulness intersects with these challenges:

Working with Intense Pain

At times, physical pain can be so overwhelming that traditional mindfulness techniques may seem inadequate. It's important not to view this as a failure. Even when pain becomes intense, you can still find ways to practice mindfulness and regain your sense of balance.

After my last surgery, I spent six weeks in the hospital. Initially, I maintained a positive attitude and managed to keep my composure, but as the pain intensified, I struggled with fear, despair, and self-pity. A conversation with a friend led to feelings of guilt, worsening my emotional state. However, by apologising the next day, I felt a shift. This experience taught me that even when overwhelmed by pain, you can still find moments of choice and rectify situations later.

Prescription Medication and Mindfulness

Some people worry that taking medications such as painkillers, tranquilisers, or antidepressants conflicts with mindfulness practice because these drugs can alter mental clarity. While it's true that medications can impact the mind, so can severe pain. The key is to find a balance.

I've found that taking an appropriate dose of pain medication, as prescribed by a pain-management consultant, allows me to manage my pain while still practising mindfulness. Reducing medication too much can leave you tense and exhausted, which impedes mindfulness. Often, mindfulness can help people feel more relaxed and improve their sleep, potentially allowing for reduced use of medications. Always consult a healthcare professional before making any changes to your medication regimen.

Distraction and Mindfulness

The role of distraction in mindfulness practice can vary depending on your condition and its severity. Temporary distraction can be helpful for acute pain that will eventually pass, and engaging in enjoyable activities can relieve immediate discomfort. However, with chronic pain, frequent distraction might become a habit of avoidance, potentially leading to greater suffering in the long run. Just as ignoring a crying child can worsen the situation, avoiding pain might increase stress and discomfort. Instead, integrating pain into your awareness while continuing with other activities can help create a more balanced and fulfilling life.

I differentiate between "compulsive distraction," where you try to escape pain through constant activity, and "aware diversion," where you consciously choose to focus on something else. For instance, reading a novel or watching a movie can be a deliberate and enjoyable way to relax. Mindfully choosing distractions can be part of an effective pain management strategy, provided it is done with intention rather than as an automatic response.



Dear Participant,

MindfulLiving™ would like to thank you for your invaluable participation in this module. We sincerely appreciate your dedication and commitment to this journey. We aim to support you in managing uncomfortable issues and overcoming pain-related obstacles.

As you engage with the "Pain-Free Living" module, remember to embrace each experience with mindfulness and resilience. Enjoy the process, relax, and find joy in your path to a more pain-free life.

If you have any questions or need support, please don't hesitate to contact me. I'm here to help you every step of the way.
Blessings and stay healthy 💖

Shery Clein
MindfulLiving™ Coach
Cultivating Awareness Intelligence

